



Standing Against Sexual Harassment and the Abuse of Power

James Finley
Unedited Transcript

Greetings, everyone. My name is Jim Finley, and along with Cynthia Bourgeault, I am one of the core teachers in the Center for Action and Contemplation founded by Father Richard Rohr. And I've been invited to share with you some reflections on how we can, as men and women of faith, men and women of good will...how can we understand and relate to how prevalent are the stories in the news of so many women coming forward around sexual harassment, sexual abuse in the workplace, and so on. And so I'd like to share some thoughts that may be clarifying and reassuring as each one of us thinks this through.

How can we ground ourselves in that Christ-like stance toward this in practical terms, to be present to it in a spirit of faith and love and sensitivity, as men and women of faith, as men and women of good will? And it seems to me an important place to start, what's at stake here, is the importance of our understanding of our God-given dignity as human beings created by God in the image and likeness of God. In God we're created equal, and that each person through the generosity of God is worth all that God is worth. And that value or worth isn't based on achievement or attainment. Because parents recognize in their newborn infant. It's that innate, inherent dignity and preciousness of the human life, which then warrants the need for it to be respected, the need for it to be protected.

And then secondly, is that our sexuality is such a God-given, integral aspect of our human experience, our sexuality deserves to be respected as a gift. And at the very minimum it means really then that our sexual boundaries be respected, namely, that no one be sexual with us unless we want them to, that is through free consent between two adults as a free act of intimacy between two people who care about each other, want to be there for each other, as gravitating toward tenderness, closeness, warmth, fulfillment that moves toward commitment, that makes the world go around, that is the foundation of the family. And so there is nothing that's more powerful at contributing to happiness and fulfillment as sexuality, in this broad sense of the world, but also, for that very reason because it's so intimate, nothing more destructive when it's abused or violated. And that's what I want to talk about here.

And I want to talk about especially about, not at this point about situations of rape where there's physical force, which is extremely traumatizing and needs to be looked at in its own right. . . . I want to talk about not positions of rape where there's physical force, but rather where two people are in a relationship and one has more power than the other, and the one who is more powerful sexualizes the relationship and exploits it to their own gratification at the price of the other in which case they dehumanize the other, or they dishonor, or violate the dignity of the other in showing no sense of empathy or caring about that. So in a very broad sense this would include all instances of incest, of sexual childhood abuse. It would involve all instances where a teacher or an athletic coach sexualizes the relationship with team members or students. It would affect the crisis the Catholic Church has been through—is still going through—where all that has come out into the open around priests sexually abusing pre-adolescent and adolescent boys. It also has to do with—I'm a psychotherapist, a psychologist—a psychotherapist who sexualizes their relationship. And also then it has to do with the workplace where the person in power—the president of the company or president of the country, whether they're a chairman of the board, where they're the boss, where they're whatever it is—they're the person on which the person in the workplace knows they depend on that person's approval, that

person's acceptance to be able to stay, to keep the job they need, the promotion they need, and that person lets them know the condition for that happening is that we be sexual.

Now in situations like this there's two things that tend not to be present. One is force. This is not a situation where there's physical force—the knife, the gunpoint, and so on. And the reason there's no force is that none is needed, because there's no resistance. And understanding why there's no resistance understands why this goes so deep and is so destructive, because there is force, a dark force, of another kind. And the person is in the position—and this touches, this gets very personal, where it is very confusing to them, and it is very scary about just how to cope with this—and so they tend to give external compliance to avoid being attacked or abandoned or facing the consequences, and as soon as they do that then they're in collusion with the secret and then there's a base of shame in it.

What makes it so hard for the person to come out into the open? Why does it take so much courage? It takes so much courage, one, because of the price they would pay. That's why anyone in a situation like this needs to be very...like prudent courage to really sort this out and know that someone's got your back, you talk it through, not to be naïve about this. So one is the realities of that. But here's what's bigger, I think—is that if you come out into the open, the society will side with the perpetrator, as it will often do. And the reason they side with the perpetrator is complicated, because society does not want to question the father figure, the authority figure. They don't want to look at the implications of that, that we're all poor weak human beings, and a person's status in the situation that they're in does not give them the right to exploit, sexualize, take advantage of anybody.

And so the more people come out—come out into the open—the more there's a possibility of a tide shifting here, where it can reach critical mass, and more and more people give more and more people courage to come out. And as it comes out into the open, it breaks the secrecy. This can only continue where there's collective collusion in secrecy.

And for me this is kind of very intimate to me, that I was invited to do this. Because I could not, I realized, with integrity share this with you without telling you that as a child I was sexually abused, and physically abused, and emotionally abused. When I graduated from high school I went to a monastery. I was very much devoted to that, committed to that. And I was sexually abused by one of the monks in the monastery, a priest who was my confessor. And I went along with it. I went along with it. I was confused by it. I...I, honestly, I look back and sadly I remember feeling honored that he chose me, that he was going to see to it that this and this and this like this. I went along. But as it builds and builds and builds I started to decompensate. I had kind of an emotional breakdown. And I left. I said nothing about this. I told nobody. Left. I went through a lot of therapy. I became a therapist. I worked with this. I was able to go down to the monastery and confront that person, which is sometimes not good to do. It worked. It was good. I'm glad I did that.

But what I want to get at is this. When I started coming out about that this happened to me, a person who I really respect—a teacher, all of it—that person said to me, “Well, did you resist?” And I felt a shame go over me, because my implication was if you didn't resist, how can you claim you were abused? And there's the tripping point right there.

So my one thought would be—I know there's a lot of things to consider, people being falsely accused and all of it...I'm not saying this is simple. But I'm saying for all of us is one aspect of a spiritual stance is we have compassion and empathy for those who are coming forward, that we be part of a societal acceptance and believing in them and helping them. And the church should be the leaven in the dough, is at the forefront of that acceptance, to break open the secrecy and to end it. And I'd add this also, is

also then help for the perpetrator. Because as a therapist I've worked with both. I've worked with victims the most, but also with perpetrators. Because they're also tragically broken. And when there's repentance, when there's acknowledgment, when there's facing the complexity of this, they also need help.

So I hope in these few brief comments this might provide some reference points for your own reflection and prayer, to approach this with kind of Christ-like wisdom, with compassion, with reality-based understanding as woven into this society right now that's at the verge of a potential deepening of a more spiritual, compassionate, grounded sexual safety in all arenas of life, and that we not sexualize betrayals of trust where there's a one-up, one-down relationship with anybody. So I hope you found this helpful. Thank you.